



I Fell Off the trailer

By SSgt Ron Eckman, Jr., Edwards AFB, Calif.

Photo by TSgt Ben Bicker

my 3 1/2-year tour with the Air Force Thunderbirds was drawing to a close. I had only 2 months left on the team before my family and I moved on. My time on the Thunderbirds was the highlight of my career thus far — who wouldn't want to go out with a bang? Well, nothing prepared me for the bang I got. In my 11-year career, I had been fortunate as an aircraft electro-environmental systems craftsman to never be seriously injured.

Sure, what electrician hasn't gotten a lesson-teaching 28-volt jolt? What aircraft maintenance person hasn't bumped their head on these F-16 multi-million dollar beauties?

My bang began when, due to a maintenance problem we had been experiencing on newly modified jet engines, Thunderbird #2 had to make a precautionary landing at Indian Springs AFAF, about 60 miles away from Nellis. That day, I was on swing shift and received a call at home shortly before I was leaving for work. They needed to send a crew up to Indian Springs to remove the suspect engine. They wanted me to go.

It wasn't uncommon to visit The Springs, because the Thunderbirds had been training there for years. The drive was an hour each way, so I knew it would be a long night, and I would miss our 7th wedding anniversary. I kissed the kids goodbye and told my wife sorry, we would have to celebrate late.

A lot of things went through my mind as we drove to "The Springs." I was

excited about my new assignment at Edwards AFB, sad to leave the Thunderbirds, and disappointed that I wouldn't be home for dinner on my anniversary.

Once we arrived, the night went well. We removed the engine and completed every operational check to help out the

dayshift crew who would be arriving the next morning with the new engine.

When we finished, it was around 1 a.m., and the Desert night chill was starting to get to us. Since the new engine would be driven in from Nellis on a flatbed truck, our last task of the

night was to load the bad engine on a flatbed for the trip to Nellis. The truck driver was waiting at the loading dock.

After getting the engine on the truck, we decided to help the driver by strapping it down and covering it. An engine mechanic and I got onto the rails of the engine trailer to unroll a tarp over it. We carefully walked along the rails unrolling as we went. As we approached the end, we needed just one more flip of the tarp to cover the whole exhaust.

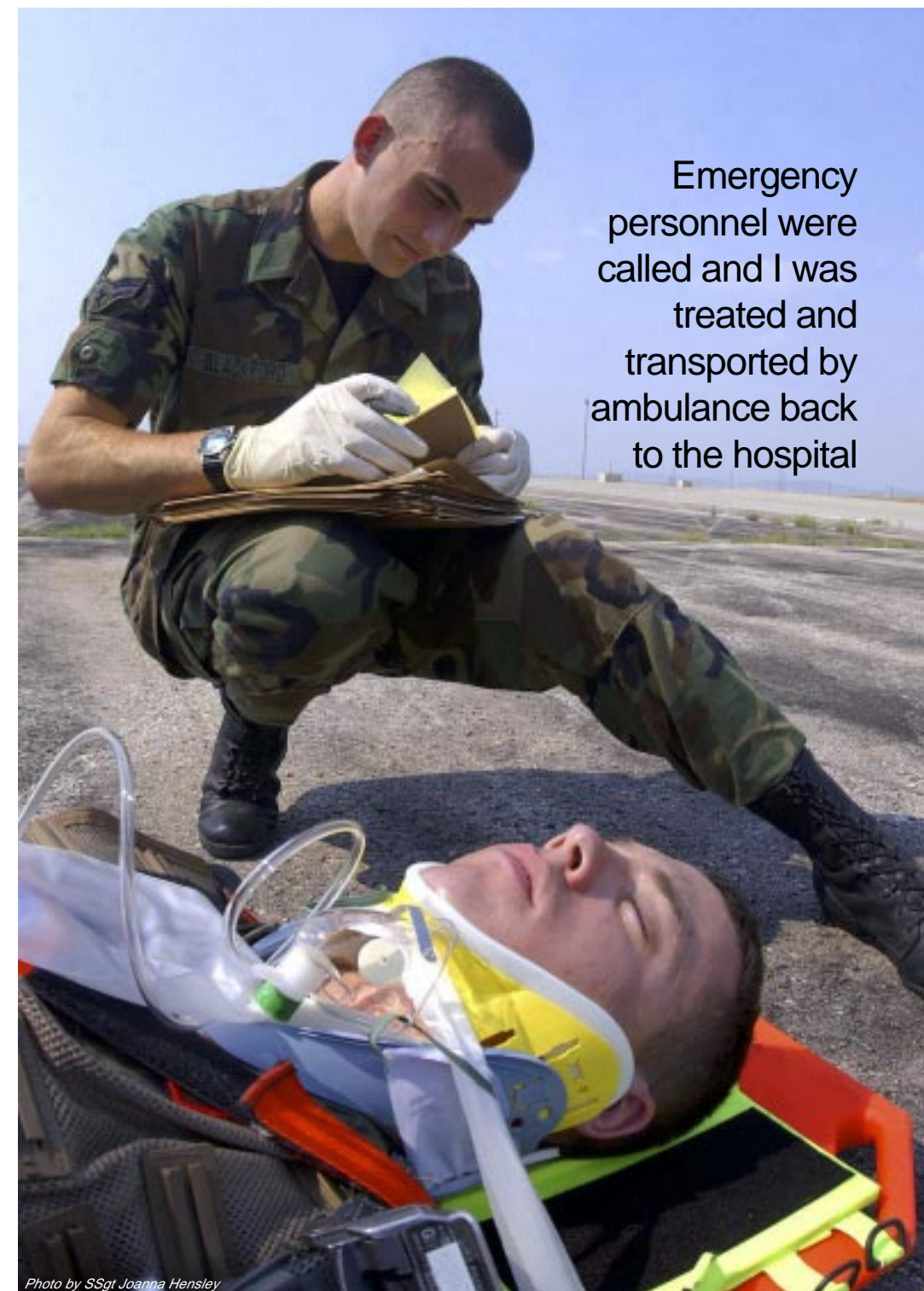
Not being aware enough of my location on the trailer, I took one more step. One very short step right off the rail of the engine trailer.

In a second, I felt my head smack the dirt in a gravel parking lot. I jumped up, not quite sure what had just happened and said, "I'm alright."

My supervisor and coworkers had seen the fall and insisted I sit down. I realized then that my head was bleeding. They called emergency personnel, and I was transported by ambulance back to the hospital at Nellis AFB. The pain wasn't only on the left side of my head but my left shoulder as well.

After replaying the incident in my mind and talking to coworkers, I realized my shoulder hit the ground first. I ended up in a lot of pain with a broken scapula (shoulder blade), a concussion, and lacerations to the head requiring nine staples.

I was restricted to administrative duties and went through physical therapy. The doctors say that my pain might stop in about 8 weeks, or I could have pain in that shoulder for life; only time will tell. Not quite the bang I had wanted to cap off a 3 1/2-year tour with the Thunderbirds.



Emergency personnel were called and I was treated and transported by ambulance back to the hospital

Photo by SSgt Joanna Hensley

In retrospect, I think that if I had just slowed down, or stopped and looked at my position, I could have prevented the accident. I was tired and in a hurry to get done, and so I fell. I did not consider my Personal Risk Management (PRM) checklist or factors. The safer thing to do would have been to get down from

the trailer and take a few seconds to find another way to reach the tarp. So, the next time you're in a hurry because it's cold, or you're thinking about things that happened the day before, or if you're excited about a PCS, take a few seconds to concentrate on the task at hand. Use good PRM, you'll be glad you did! ►

I felt my head smack the ground!

Photo by SSgt Sam Bender